POLI 142A: United States Foreign Policy
Democracy and Foreign Policy

Erik Gartzke
POLI 142A, Lec. 9a
July 27, 2015
Empirical generalization

- Immanuel Kant 1795; Small and Singer 1976; Doyle 1983
- Strong form: No two “democracies” have ever fought a “war”
- Weak form: Wars between two democracies are very rare
- Democracies are not more peaceful when facing non-democracies
Statistical tests

• Democratic peace is among the most robust generalizations in political science

• Controls for
  – Contiguity
  – Power distribution
  – Alliances (and expected utility)
  – Wealth, trade, economic growth
Competing Explanations

• Norms and preferences
• Institutional constraints
• Trade
• Security/Geography
• Information
Norms and preferences

- Democratic legal culture creates habits and expectations of peaceful resolution of conflicts
- Democratic publics disapprove of war as an instrument of policy
- Democratic publics have common interests, so serious conflicts are unlikely to arise
Institutional constraints

• Democratic leaders are bound by rule of law
• Role of Congress, Parliament (Veto Points)
• Preferences of the median voter
• Voter control through retrospective voting
Elected officials have preferences close to the median voter
Voter control

• Median voter pays cost of war, but does not benefit
• Politicians want to be reelected
• Voters can control politicians by voting retrospectively
Effects of Constraints

• Democratic leaders have less freedom of action

• Are democracies bullied around by other states?

• But, veto points increase bargaining leverage! (two-level games)
Gambling for resurrection

• There is uncertainty about whether the incumbent is competent or not

• Voters punish leaders for bad policy outcome, but outcome depends on chance

Downs & Rocke 1994
Gambling for resurrection

• Competent leaders who face bad luck get unjustly punished

• Incompetent leaders are reluctant to end an unsuccessful war, to preserve office

• Democratic leaders are more likely to gamble for resurrection

Downs & Rocke 1994
How effective are constraints?

• Opponents of the Mexican-American War in Congress were six times more likely to retire.

• Opponents of WWI were twice as likely.

• Gulf War of 1991.

• Second Gulf War.

• Since 1789 the U.S. has used force over 200 times; it has declared war five times.

Schultz 2001
Trade vs. Democracy

• Who is democratic (constraints), who trades (preferences)?

• Russett & Oneal: Both trade and democracy reduce probability of conflict
Security/Geography

• Cold War alliances are important and durable
  • Divide world along regime lines
  • Do not explain the democratic peace
• Democracy clusters
  • Neighbors are more likely to fight
  • This implies observed effect underestimates impact of democracy in inhibiting violence
Information

• Audience costs
• Transparency
• Impossibility of strategic surprise
• Cheap talk signaling
Audience costs

• War arises b/c of incomplete information
• Democratic leaders can signal resolve (if they have it) by making public commitments
• Voters punish them if they back down
• Democracies are less likely to be challenged when they are resolved

Fearon 1994
Audience costs

- So why are democracies unable to avoid conflicts with non-democracies?
- Why is it rational for voters to punish leaders who bluff, if the leaders are trying to protect the voters’ interests?

Fearon 1994
Transparency

• War arises b/c of incomplete information

• The preferences of democracies are transparent
  – Democratic leaders find it hard to bluff
  – Foreign leaders rarely misinterpret signs of resolve

• So why are democracies unable to avoid
Impossibility of Surprise

• Free press & separation of powers make surprise attack very difficult

• Democratic leaders are less tempted to start surprise wars

• Potential opponents are less insecure

• The security dilemma is less binding
Cheap talk signaling

• War arises b/c of incomplete information
• Opposition parties can credibly signal that the incumbent is resolved
• Opposition has cross-cutting incentives to support and undermine the incumbent, so its claims are credible
• Resolved democracies signal, and voters rationally reward the opposition when it reveals the incumbent’s weakness

Ramsay 2004
Capitalist Peace

• Long tradition of inquiry about the role of commerce in promoting peace (Montesquieu, Payne, Cobden, Angell, Rosecrance)

• Traditional argument: Opportunity Costs
  • Nations are loath to fight when fighting interferes with valuable commerce
  • Peace prevails when merchants gain influence over politics/foreign policy
Capitalist Peace II

- Norman Angell (mostly right)
  - Traditional inputs to production could be stolen through force
  - Financial capital is not easily coerced
  - Intellectual capital is also hard to capture
- Rationale also provides a common origin for both rise of democracy and interstate peace.
Capitalist Peace III

• Trade probably not that important
• Financial markets serve similar function to domestic audiences
• Development discourages territorial aggression
• Policy affinity affects interest in competition

Gartzke 2007
Tentative conclusions

• Important empirical generalization
  • Few “laws” in the study of foreign policy
• A plethora of competing explanations
  • All cannot be (equally) correct
• We learn most where the world gives us tractable riddles that require new thinking